

**Maj. Gen. Torrence Saxe**

*Commissioner & Adjutant General*

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**Alaska National Guard**

*Department of Military  
and Veterans Affairs*

Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska

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By Edward Eagerton

*Joint Force Headquarters*

## **Alaska National Guard Colonel Wayne Don promoted to Brigadier General**

**Wasilla, Alaska** — Brig. Gen. Wayne Don, director of joint staff for the Alaska National Guard, was promoted as the newest general officer in Alaska at a ceremony in Wasilla, Feb. 6, becoming the highest-ranking Alaska Native currently serving in the Alaska National Guard.

Don was joined by friends, family, and fellow Guardsmen at a small ceremony in Wasilla, and, due to COVID-19, a larger audience was able to attend via a Zoom meeting that was simultaneously being broadcasted. During the ceremony, his new rank insignia were pinned on his uniform by his daughter, Delaina, and his son, Gannon.

Maj. Gen. Torrence Saxe, adjutant general of the Alaska National Guard and presiding official for the ceremony, said that with this promotion comes great responsibility, and that Don was the man for the job.

"Promotions are not about power or prestige," explained Saxe. "They are about responsibility, and his role in that responsibility for the mission and taking care of the Soldiers has just increased exponentially. Wayne, you were born to lead, you were born to take care of the Soldiers, and you were born to take care of the mission. We are blessed to have somebody like that on the team."

A member of the Cupig and Yupik tribes, Don grew up in Mekoryuk, a village on Nunivak Island, 500 miles west of Anchorage in the Bering Sea. His family has a history of service, both of his grandparents having served in the Alaska Territorial Guard during World War II.

Don first entered into military service in 1994, when he received a commission in the U.S. Army as an infantry officer through the University of Alaska, Fairbanks Reserve Officer Training Corps. While serving in the active duty Army, Don served in the 1st Armored Division, the 101st Airborne Division, and his last active duty assignment was with cadet command as an ROTC instructor at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks in 2001. In 2005, he transitioned to the Alaska Army National Guard.

Don explained that he learned the meaning of leadership from the officers that mentored him over the course of his career. One of the most impactful influences on his development as a young lieutenant was his first company commander, retired Lt. Col. Lee Rysewyk.

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"When I arrived at my first unit," he reflected back, "my first company commander had actually been to the Gulf War with the 101st Airborne Division, and would go on to serve in the 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment in the Battle of Mogadishu. Arguably, when I showed up, Lee was one of the most experienced company grade officers in the Army at that very point in time."

Don explained that Rysewyk taught him the value of discipline and readiness.

"He taught me the tremendous tenants of training, about discipline, about being physically ready, and never, ever demanding anything less than the standard in terms of being prepared," Don elaborated. "He had very much seen the consequences of what happens when you're not ready. He had been through so much, and he imparted those things on me as a young man in my first unit."

Further reflecting on some of the formative lessons in his early development as an Army officer, Don imparted one of those moments when his first battalion commander, retired Maj. Gen. Tony Cucolo, then a lieutenant colonel, showed up at Don's first training exercise.

"Lee told me the old man (Cucolo) was going to come out and take a look at some of our training," said Don. "When he showed up, we walked the lanes, and I could see without him saying a word that he was evaluating the discipline of our troops, the discipline of the noncommissioned officers, and the quality of the training. Being satisfied with what he saw, he said, 'Wayne, I'm ready to go back.'"

Don explained that he had walked the lanes hundreds of times in order to know the lanes like the back of hands, but while leading Cucolo back, Don had become lost.

"As we walked back and we crossed the road," said Don, "I think he saw that I momentarily lost orientation about where we were at, and he threw me a lifeline and said, 'Wayne, shouldn't we turn to the right?' Not wanting to appear that I was lost, I said 'no sir, we go straight ahead.'"

Don said that he could see the look on Cucolo's face and that he knew that Don was lost. However, instead of correcting him, the battalion commander allowed him to continue leading the way.

"He let me be in charge," continued Don, "and when we got to where we were going, I realized that I made him walk another 500 meters more than he needed to. But instead of reprimanding me or telling me that I didn't know what I was doing because I was a lieutenant, he let me have my moment and let me be in charge. He let me learn from my mistake. He didn't say a word about it ever, and I was always very thankful for that, and I always remember that when I deal with my subordinates."

These types of lessons not only helped shape Don as a Soldier, but also as a leader, charged with mentoring others.

"Those are the formative things that have influenced who I am, what I'm about, and how I soldier," said Don. "I will continue to do that for as long as I'm allowed to, and for the privilege of wearing our country's cloth for as long as I can."

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## Photos

1. **Attached pdf** includes story and a small selection of low-resolution photos for viewing on screen.
2. **DVIDS link** includes selected full-resolution photos. (Accessible from military computers.)  
<https://www.dvidshub.net/news/388738/alaska-national-guard-colonel-wayne-don-promoted-brigadier-general>



Family members of Brig. Gen. Wayne Don, director of joint staff for the Alaska National Guard, look at the promotion program before Don's promotion from colonel to brigadier general at a ceremony in Wasilla, Alaska, Feb. 7, 2021. Don entered service in the U.S. Army in 1994, and served in the active duty Army until he transitioned to the Alaska Army National Guard in 2005. A member of the Cupig and Yupik tribes, Don is currently the highest-ranking Alaska Native in the Alaska National Guard. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Edward Eagerton)



Alaska Army National Guard chaplain Col. Richard Koch gives the invocation at the promotion ceremony of Brig. Gen. Wayne Don, director of joint staff for the Alaska National Guard, in Wasilla, Alaska, Feb. 7, 2021. Don was promoted from colonel to brigadier general after 27 years of service. He entered service in the U.S. Army in 1994, and served in the active duty Army until he transitioned to the Alaska Army National Guard in 2005. A member of the Cupig and Yupik tribes, Don is currently the highest-ranking Alaska Native in the Alaska National Guard. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Edward Eagerton)



Maj. Gen. Torrence Saxe, adjutant general of the Alaska National Guard, gives a speech for Col. Wayne Don, director of joint staff for the Alaska National Guard, before his promotion to brigadier general at a ceremony in Wasilla, Alaska, Feb. 7, 2021. Don entered service in the U.S. Army in 1994, and served in the active duty Army until he transitioned to the Alaska Army National Guard in 2005. A member of the Cupig and Yupik tribes, Don is currently the highest-ranking Alaska Native in the Alaska National Guard. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Edward Eagerton)



Brig. Gen. Wayne Don, director of joint staff for the Alaska National Guard, has his new rank insignia pinned on by his daughter, Delaina, and son, Gannon, during his promotion from colonel to brigadier general at a ceremony in Wasilla, Alaska, Feb. 7, 2021. Don entered service in the U.S. Army in 1994, and served in the active duty Army until he transitioned to the Alaska Army National Guard in 2005. A member of the Cupig and Yupik tribes, Don is currently the highest-ranking Alaska Native in the Alaska National Guard. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Edward Eagerton)



Brig. Gen. Wayne Don, director of joint staff for the Alaska National Guard, gives a speech after being promoted from colonel to brigadier general at a ceremony in Wasilla, Alaska, Feb. 7, 2021. Don entered service in the U.S. Army in 1994, and served in the active duty Army until he transitioned to the Alaska Army National Guard in 2005. A member of the Cupig and Yupik tribes, Don is currently the highest-ranking Alaska Native in the Alaska National Guard. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Edward Eagerton)



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